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ABSTRACT

Youth Action Teams have been implemented in over 14 sites across the country in the past few years. Such teams are made up of a diverse group of youth working together on a project through the school, a youth service organization, a community organization, or the government. The team decides its focus, and what projects its members wish to undertake. These range from developing employment opportunities, to writing newsletters, or lobbying for a cause. Youth Action Teams are designed to merge educational experience with direct aid to the community by allowing young people to find solutions to the problems they face. Team members receive academic credit for what they learn. Whenever possible, they are paid for the services they provide. This bulletin describes how a youth action team can begin to operate and highlights projects in San Rafael and Berkeley (California); Portland (Oregon); and East Lansing (Michigan). (Author/MLF)

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Technical Assistance Bulletin

Youth Action Teams: An Approach to Student Involvement

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Summary

Youth Action Teams have been implemented in over 14 sites across the country in the past few years. Such teams are made up of a diverse group of youth working together on a project through the school, a youth service organization, a community organization or the government. The team decides its focus, and what projects its members wish to undertake. These range from developing employment opportunities, to writing newsletters, or lobbying for a cause. Usually the team is guided by an adult or older youth who allows the team to become more independent by encouraging group participation and decision-making. The strength of the team is that youth are actively involved and taking the initiative in the project's development. This bulletin describes how a youth action team can begin to operate and highlights projects in San Raphael, California; Berkeley, California; Portland, Oregon; and East Lansing, Michigan.

The Problem

A growing body of research and practice indicates that when young people are active both in their own education and in the activities that meet the real needs of our communities, their sense of self-worth increases, their involvement in socially destructive acts decreases, and a valuable resource for positive change is mobilized. Too often, however, youth are estranged from the educational process and disenfranchised from meaningful participation in society.

The paradox is that an educational system that purports to prepare youth for responsible participation in the adult society often does so by cutting off opportunities for decisionmaking and productive accomplishment.

The Solution

There is growing interest in making youth participation a reality. One strategy is the Youth Action Team, originally implemented in 14 sites in 1978. The Youth Action Team concept brings together a number of ideas that have worked in the past, but with a new twist. The difference is a small-group team approach that shares power and responsibility through consensus decision-making. The Youth Action Team concept views young people as naturally responsible and therefore deserving of empowerment, and provides an informal mechanism for effecting such empowerment in a school or community setting.

Youth Action Teams are designed to merge educational experience with direct aid to the community by allowing young people to find solutions to the problems they face. As a first step a study project is formed involving 8 to 12 young people. The team selects a specific area to research, like reducing school crime and violence, developing new jobs for youth, or evaluating the juvenile justice system. Team members receive academic credit for what they learn. Whenever possible, they are paid for the services they provide.

The Team

A team should be diverse, with members of different ages, races, and economic back-

EA 013 379

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grounds. Team members can learn a lot from each other because of their diversity. The variety of viewpoints and experiences encourages members to confront their personal biases and their stereotypes of others.

The main criterion used for selecting team members is a concern for other young people and a willingness to work. School grades, work experience, criminal records or medical handicaps are not used as criteria.

A team can operate anywhere: schools, youth service agencies, community organizations, and government agencies. A team can be formed to work any time: in school, after school, or full time during the summer.

The Team Organizer

As this concept was first implemented, two other people worked closely with each team--a team organizer and a learning coordinator. The team organizer is an older youth experienced in planning and developing programs. S/he assists the team in designing and carrying out a project. A young college student majoring in human service or someone with equivalent work experience would be a logical choice. Ideally, a person who was recently in high school should be chosen because s/he will be closer to young people. S/he also acts as a facilitator and, therefore, needs a knack for group dynamics.

The team organizer starts out more of a leader than an organizer, to get the team going. The leadership role changes quickly as the team assumes more and more responsibility.

The organizer encourages the group to more active participation by including everyone in the decision-making process through consensus. As the occasions arise s/he relinquishes control and power freely. The role of the organizer becomes that of guiding rather than directing. The team organizer's main purpose is the development of a team that makes and lives by its own decisions.

The Learning Coordinator

The learning coordinator is someone such as a teacher, counselor, or project director. S/he helps build in an accredited education component by developing learning contracts with each member. A learning contract is a written agreement between the school system and the team member via the learning coordinator. The contract is written to outline the student's learning objectives for a given subject, and the time period in which study will occur. It includes a statement of how the student will go about achieving stated objectives, what part the coordinator will play and what method will be used to determine if the objectives are met.

The learning coordinator also offers or arranges mini-seminars and workshops to increase knowledge and promote skills development. Additionally, s/he helps locate possible resources for the team. S/he serves as the legitimizer of academic credit and is usually the one with overall administrative responsibility for the project.

Ideally the learning coordinator works with a team as a partner. S/he doesn't direct the team, but gives expert advice and is treated as a contributing member. There are times when the group may act hastily without adequate information. In such cases the learning coordinator should tactfully delay action until further research is undertaken. These delays take place through introducing relevant ideas or information, rather than pulling rank. The learning coordinator's primary concern is to raise questions and place ideas into a perspective. S/he assists the team in reaching its own conclusions, instead of providing the answers.

The San Rafael, California, YAT

In San Rafael, California, during 1978, the Social Action Research Center received a government grant on Youth Participation in Program Development. The project was designed to promote inter-agency cooperation in youth participation as an approach to improving school climate. The project began by forming 14 state and metropolitan task forces made up of policy level people in Education, Juvenile Justice, Mental Health and CETA.

To increase youth participation in the project a Youth Action Team was developed. It had ten members between the ages of 12 and 21. Their educational experiences varied greatly from a high school dropout to one member who had attended a private school. The team was multi-ethnic as well, including Black, Chicano, White, and Japanese students.

An unusual aspect of the team was the selection process. Team members were hired as soon as they came in the door. "This way no one could contend that the team was roughly selected," said Dennie Briggs, the project/learning coordinator. "It actually represented what could happen anywhere."

Most of the members were hired through CETA, but some members did not qualify for funding. Social Action Research Center provided the pay for those who didn't meet the guidelines. All members were paid on a sliding scale from minimum wage to $4.50 per hour, according to their previous work and school experiences.

The teams's first project was the development of a newsletter called New Dimensions in Youth Education and Employment. The newsletter's initial target audience was the 14 task forces, but the mailing list soon grew to over 1,000, including people in places as far away as England, France, and Greece.

In addition, the team compiled resource material for a conference which gathered the task forces together. The members also identified several young people who were active in youth participation and brought them to the conference for a panel presentation.

Through their varied activities, members learned group process, program development, research, publication, and proposal writing skills. They had a chance to visit and evaluate other youth projects and review proposals submitted to Youthwork, Inc.

"It's been a very challenging experience," said team member Carolynn Neyland, 17. "I've learned the good and bad side of working with other people, but this has given me a realistic view of the world of work: what it is, what it could be."

The Berkeley Youth Alternatives Project

Berkeley Youth Alternatives (BYA) in Berkeley, California has a youth managed and operated recycling business. Over 50 percent of the project's budget pays young people between $3.50 and $5.00 per hour, well above the standard minimum wage. The young employees learn job skills while helping to restore local neighborhoods.

When the project started, the young people collected and compiled information on all the existing conservation projects within the area. Next, they talked with citizen action groups and went door-to-door to educate the community on the value of recycling. Having made contact with the community, they planned out their house-to-house pick-up service of glass, metal, and newspapers. They recruited youth whom they came in contact with during their door-to-door efforts. All the recyclable materials were resold and the money put back into the project.

The young recyclers also started a computer recycling division. The costs of training and initial tools and equipment were paid for by selling reclaimed gold and silver from obsolete and discarded computers. BYA anticipates that before long the Youth Recycling Center will become self-sufficient.

The recycling project provides educational guidance and support by coordinating school and work, and by furnishing individual tutoring in basic skills. A local high school awards academic credit for work experiences. Several areas of learning are covered, such as ecology, public relations, and small business planning and management.

The Portland Project

In the summer of 1977 the Youth Employment Planning Team operating out of Portland University developed a plan for creating 50 new jobs for youth. The team was composed of 10 unemployed young people, ages 15 to 19, and three supporting adults. It was organized as a project-oriented learning situation. The team's learning areas included urban design and planning, person-power utilization, research methods and writing.

The young people were recruited from three local youth service agencies. Their wages were paid by CETA, and office space and supplies were donated by the college. Initially, the team considered several areas in which to launch their project. They considered recreation, education, and public transportation. Portland's transit system was chosen because it was the most likely place to have steady employment growth. They believed it was an ideal site for job creation, because energy costs, congestion

and pollution problems would probably grow, which would influence more and more people to use the public transportation system. Another reason for choosing it was the discovery of a transit system policy of not hiring anyone under the age of 21.

After assessing the transit system the team designed several types of jobs that youth could fill. These jobs included an escort service for the elderly and the handicapped, providing the public with information to promote bus ridership, and the coordination of entertainment for those waiting for the bus at the downtown mall.

During the summer the team negotiated with local unions, political leaders, schools, and the public transit management for the jobs. The federal government, through Portland's Youth Service Division, offered to fund the project. However, a turn of events brought in new management that was unfamiliar with the transit system. They proved to be unwilling to take on the extra burden of job creation. With no positive responses from management, the city of Portland backed down from the funding program. Despite the fact that the jobs were prevented from being implemented, the process used in developing the jobs is an excellent example of combining education and work to combat youth unemployment.

The East Lansing Project

In East Lansing, Michigan, a group of young people formed a non-profit organization run by youth and for youth. It's called the 3:00 Lobby and has been in existence for over two years.

The Lobby takes its name from the well-known hour when schools traditionally let out. Its goal, as stated by the Lobby's young public relations coordinator, Christopher Magnus, is to "raise the consciousness of youth on social and legislative issues, and to unite young people to have influence and power over the forces that affect them."

Members of the Lobby wrote a proposal requesting funding from Michigan State Juvenile Justice Services. They received a demonstration grant for $10,000 to establish a toll-free information number and hire two youth part-time to answer the phones, do research, and make contacts with other organizations.

The Lobby's governing body is a steering committee made up of 25 to 30 people, three-fourths of whom must be under the age of 18. After age 18, steering committee members can become a part of a young adult support group which is not formally a part of the Lobby, but continues to assist in its efforts.

Positions taken by the Lobby include supporting the rights of young people to receive birth control information and eliminating the status offender category. They opposed increasing the drinking age from 18 to 21 and establishing a lower minimum wage for youth.

The Lobby recently applied for and received a small grant from the Playboy Foundation to continue their advocacy program. Some of their current activities include reviewing the state's juvenile justice policies and spreading the word about child abuse. They are also in the process of developing a manual on how to start a youth-run lobby.

Replication Issues

The Youth Action Team concept can be applied in either a school or community setting. What is required is commitment by the school administration to recognize the validity of experience-based learning, and commitment by some segment of the community to allow the possibility of youth involvement.

References

A manual was prepared by the San Rafael group that details the steps in setting up a team, possible activities, and ways to facilitate group process. It is cited below.

Sundlee, Craig A., Stapp, Willie. The YAT* Manual, Youth Action Teams. San Rafael, California: Social Action Research Center, 1979.

This book is available through the Social Action Research Center, 18 Professional Center Parkway, San Rafael, CA 94903 Tel: (415) 472-2800.

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